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PAINTED CAVE FIRE 30TH ANNIVERSARY

Painted Cave Fire 30th Anniversary

ROBERT BERNSTEIN / JUN 26 2020 11:45 AM / BYSBROBERT / 15 COMMENTS / READS 2011

By Robert Bernstein

This week marks the 30th anniversary of the start of the Painted Cave Fire which officially burned from June 27, 1990 to July 2, 1990.

Here are my photos from that horrific fire that I have never shared before.

At the time, it was the most destructive fire in California history, with 641 structures destroyed. 4,900 acres were burned. Andrea Lang Gurka, age 37, died while fleeing the flames along San Marcos Pass Road.

It was an exceptionally hot day. Records indicate the high temperature was 109 degrees. The call went out for a brush fire at 6:02 PM and the first fire engine arrived just minutes later. Firefighters were still finishing up fighting another fire at that time.

This was the scene from near my apartment off Phelps Road in Goleta where Girsh Park is today:

It looked a bit scary, but under normal circumstances it looked manageable. Most of the time the prevailing winds would be uphill on the mountain face. Which would take the fire away from the major populated areas. But the extreme heat and powerful down-slope winds made this anything but normal.

The smoke was soon billowing high in the air over our neighborhood

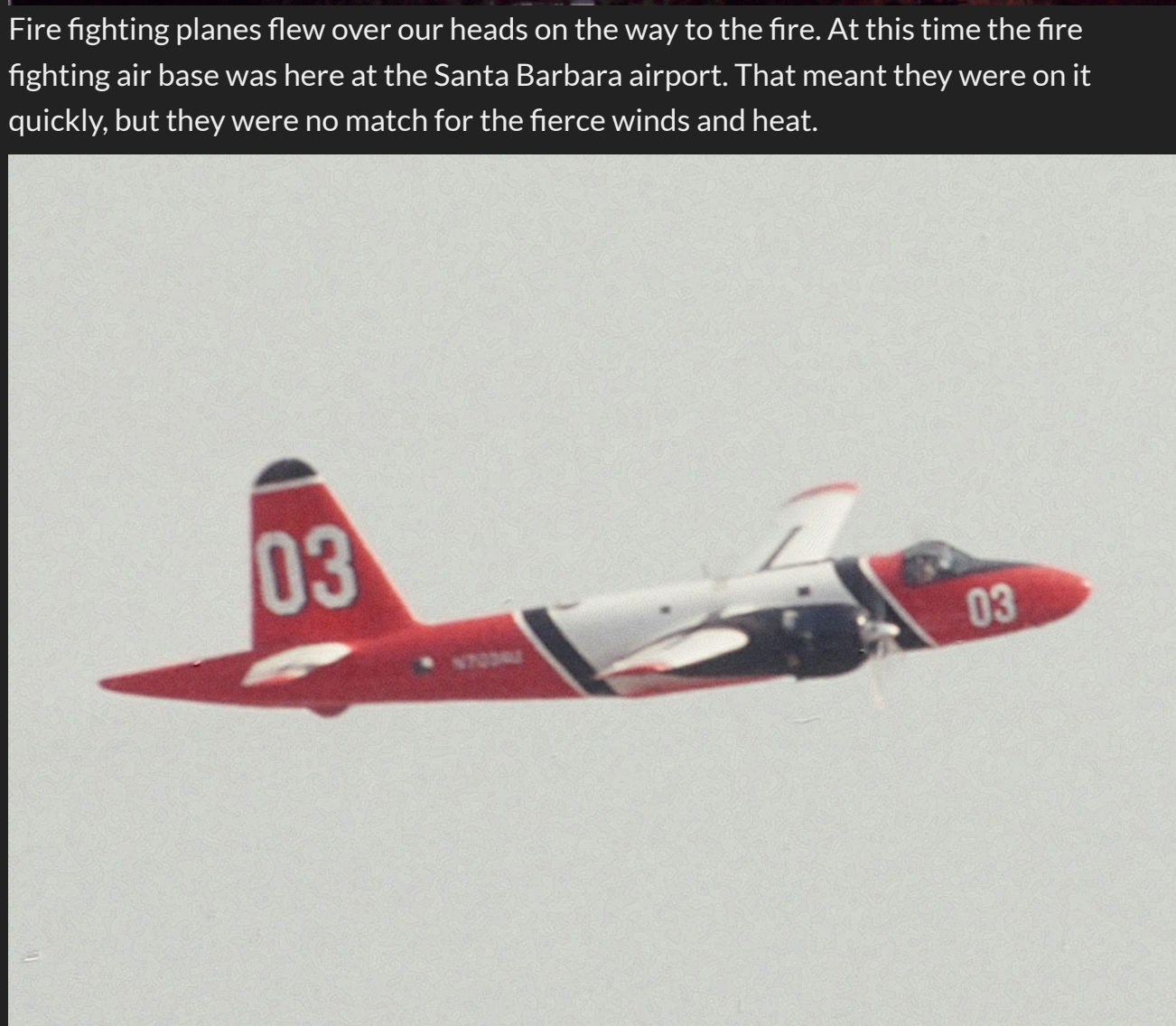
And flames could be seen sweeping down the mountain

In just two hours the flames had come all the way down to the freeway and jumped over the freeway as if it was not even there. The fire was so intense. It was more a matter of the winds blowing embers at high speed over vast distances.

As night fell, people gathered to watch from our area of Goleta.

Many of us did not realize that San Marcos Pass was almost directly above us. Including the KEYT reporters, who at one point reported that the fire was coming into our neighborhood. Fortunately for us they were wrong. The fire came down in the area near 154 and Highway 101.

Fire fighting planes flew over our heads on the way to the fire. At this time the fire fighting air base was here at the Santa Barbara airport. That meant they were on it quickly, but they were no match for the fierce winds and heat.



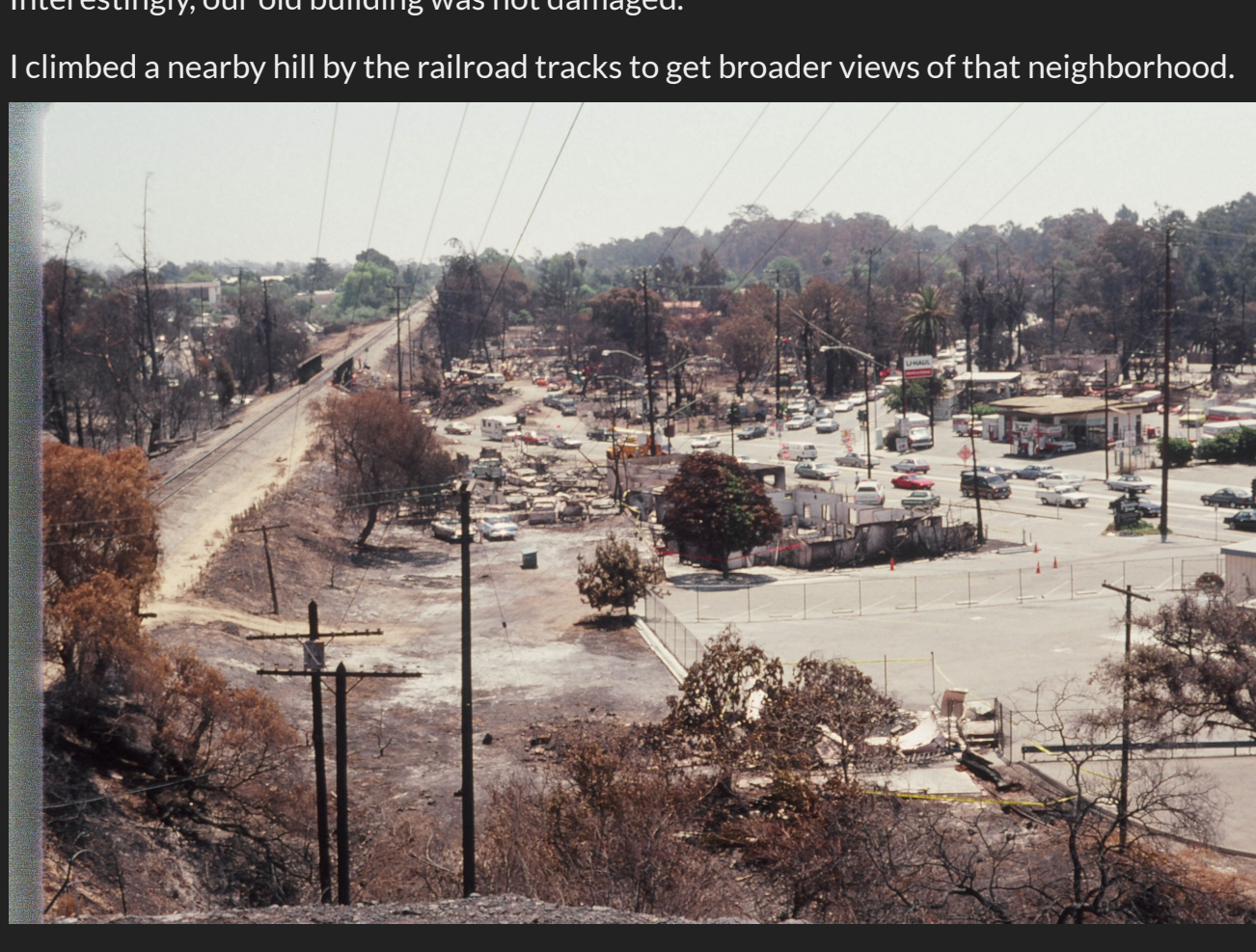
Our company, Digital Instruments, had been in an old brick bank records building near the corner of Hollister and Modoc Road. We had moved out to the area near Hollister and Storke not long before the Painted Cave Fire. It was sad to see that entire neighborhood around where we had been almost completely destroyed. I rode my bicycle over to that neighborhood to survey the damage.

The iconic Santa Barbara restaurant "The Philadelphia House" was in total ruins and never came back.

The fact that a tile company burned showed how complete the destruction had been.

Interestingly, our old building was not damaged.

I climbed a nearby hill by the railroad tracks to get broader views of that neighborhood.



And a view of the total destruction looking back up toward the mountains

Later, I went for a ride with my co-worker friend Peter Maivald up San Marcos Pass Road and we got this sweeping view of the total destruction below

Our illustrious employer Virgil Elings owned a house on Via Clarice in the middle of that area of total destruction. His one house was an island that was spared. He had a small orchard on his property that had an automatic watering system.

He stayed on the property as long as possible, hosing down his roof. Then he turned on that watering system and fled when there was no other choice. Those actions saved his home. Again, it showed that in this case the fire was big, but mostly it was spread by embers. Keeping things watered was enough to keep the embers from taking hold.

Fire fighters will always tell people to get out and not risk getting caught in the fire, but sometimes it does pay to stay awhile and fight the fire. It is a big risk, though, no doubt about it.

Fire investigators quickly determined that it was a case of arson and found the point of origin near the intersection of Highway 154 and Painted Cave Road. But arson fires are very difficult to investigate because much evidence is destroyed in the fire. The case soon went cold. But about five years later Peggy Finley told her minister that her former boyfriend Leonard Ross had admitted to starting the fire.

Ross told her he lit the fire to burn out his neighbor Michael Linthicum as a result of an ongoing feud between them. Linthicum's house in fact was one of the first homes destroyed in the fire. Ross said he did not realize it would get out of control.

But there was never enough evidence to prosecute Ross criminally. However, in 2000 he was successfully prosecuted in a civil case and ordered to pay $2.75 million in damages. Ross earned very little money in a craft business and his own property was so remote it was of little value. There was little chance of paying much of those damages.

When the Painted Cave fire happened it was so extraordinarily huge and destructive it was hard to imagine anything worse coming later to our region.

But the December 2017 Thomas Fire was almost 60 times bigger in terms of acres destroyed and almost twice as destructive in terms of structures. While the Thomas fire killed two people directly, another 21 deaths resulted in the Montecito mudflow which was a result of the fire.

Record fires have been coming ever more often in recent years in terms of area and structures destroyed. The worst to date being the November 2018 Camp Fire which destroyed the entire town of Paradise. It destroyed 18,804 structures and killed 86 people.

Humans have created a perfect storm of destruction by altering the climate and by building ever more into previously natural areas.

Let us remember the terrible loss and tragedy of the Painted Cave Fire on this 30th anniversary. And let us also redouble our efforts to stop the forces that are leading to ever more of these tragedies.

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A-1593266907 JUN 27, 2020 06:50 AM

I was sitting in my business and said to my employee "Hey, there's a fire at the dump. Want to drive up Gibralter to Camino Cielo and watch it burn from above?" So that's what we did. But it was pretty much out by then, so we went over and looked in Painted Cave, then came back out onto 154. There were NO cars. we looked both ways, it was like "The Day The Earth Stood Still." Fierce hot and windy, but we still had no idea there was a fire up by us. It was blowing entirely downhill. So we turned down 154, and drove right into the fire. There were burning tumbleweeds flying across the road, the wooden railings were all lit up like birthday candles on a cake. We were both screaming DON'T SLOW DOWN and I'll never forget the look on my dog's face, how you could see a ring of white all around her pupil in her eyes. At Cathedral Oaks we came shooting out of the smoke and the CHP and observers were all lined up in the road, staring up the hill behind us. In just minutes it roared down 154 behind us and jumped the 101. Stupidest thing I'd ever done.

SBDUDE JUN 26, 2020 11:20 PM

My first big SB fire. Super scary. And they all still are.

NIKSINGHLAMBET JUN 26, 2020 09:56 PM

I remember that day vividly.. My mother was at PUFF and my Grandma was visiting her. I was with family friends off Hollister on Arboleda Road. Everyone was hosing off roofs and loading up station wagons. We were waiting and waiting for my Grandma to come pick me up. They had decided that if she didn't come by a certain time that they would take me with them wherever they decided to evacuate to. I think at the end they decided to stay because the fire had been stopped at Hollister and they were a few blocks below Hollister. Finally my Grandma arrived somehow by the grace of God. I remember us having to drive all around trying to figure out where to go to go home close to the mission. We were driving around for hours it seemed and we finally made it to Earl Warren show grounds. We got to state street from there and drove home. A couple days later a friend of my Grandpa's took me and him to see the damage along San Marcos Pass and the surrounding areas. The church I attended on San Antonio Creek Road was spared but everything around the church burnt to the ground.

A-1593266907 JUN 26, 2020 08:37 PM

Yes, people were pretty horrified when the fire jumped the 101. When you drive past, right there at Modoc and State, you can look at the palms on the north side of State and still see some black on those trees. ***########*** I had a friend who owned horses. Up near San Antonio Creek Rd. is where her horses were boarded. (I don't know the exact location.) This friend got out her horse trailer at the first whiff of smoke and said she was running around in her muumuu (she had left her house in that much of a hurry to get to her horses), yelling at people to get their trailers set up and get their horses the hell out of there.. She said people were just standing there, staring at her. Guess they thought she was nuts. Not sure how many horses died because owners weren't able to trailer them and get them out. The fire moved so fast . . .

A-1593266907 JUN 27, 2020 12:21 AM

Many horses died, including those of my neighbor. It was a sight I will never be able to forget. But all the horses in a pasture on the other end of my street survived. It was a miracle. To see those horses still standing in the middle of the devastation was the only thing that kept us all together. We lost everything in that fire. I was caught in the middle of it. As others have said everyone thought it was just the dump fire flaring up again. It only took about 10 minutes to realize this was not the dump fire and we were all running for our lives. The was no warning, no firefighters, no help at all. They could not get there. It was an inferno and the gridlocked traffic prevented any engines from accessing our area. It took a mere 45 minutes for that fire to travel from Ignition point to the 101. There has never been a more destructive fire in Santa County. It is a miracle more didn't die. I feel for the family of Andrea who perished. It is still infuriating that arsonists never got what he deserved.

SHASTA GUY JUN 26, 2020 05:01 PM

Thanks for the photos Robert. I left my office between 5:00-6:00 in Goleta and immediately felt the 90F breeze hit my face, and I thought to myself what a nice Northern California summer day. HoWeber when I looked at the ridge I saw a horizontal smoke plume coming off of San Marcos Pass. I thought to myself, this is a bad day to have a controlled burn, who would ever do that? As I made my way on 101 to SB the smoke plume began to blow over town. I made it before the fire jumped 101. There are still a few burned snags still visible from 101 as you approach the Page center. That was a scary time. No internet just TV news and radio for updates.

A-1593266907 JUN 26, 2020 04:57 PM

Got my parents' dogs out just before their house burned. totally crazy- no cell phones back then. Had to stand in line for the pay phone at the vons on turnpike. Something that bothered me then and still does, is when local radio stations continue with music when there is a disaster occurring. It seems with fires since- gap, tea, Jesusita, Thomas, holiday, the winds die down durning the day and people become complacent. Then the evening winds pick up and it's a sh*t show. Never let your guard down!

A-1593266907 JUN 26, 2020 03:26 PM

Many people either never knew or have forgot that the first smoke seen was because some old tires had caught fire on El Sueño Rd, at what was then "the dump." So . . . due to that smaller fire, there was a real lag time in fighting the fire that Ross had set. People thought it was just smoke from the tires they were seeing and not some blazing fire located at Painted Cave which would soon become an out of control conflagration.

TAGDES JUN 26, 2020 06:21 PM

That fire was at the recycling yard at El Dumpo as we called it at the Co. Road Yard, not at El Sueno. I was there the whole time while looking for keys to the El Sueno gate at Cathedral Oaks along with the Battalion Chief. We went ahead and cut the locks as that fire was still in danger of El Sueno.

A-1593266907 JUN 26, 2020 03:41 PM

I actually had heard that, and because of the dump fire, I decided to use surface streets to go home from the Mesa to Goleta, figuring that the 101 would be packed. Then, as I drove those side streets, I saw the unforgettable sight that was Painted Cave.

ROGER JUN 26, 2020 02:43 PM

I was on the corner of Calle Real and 154 when that fire came down the mountain I thought it was the 2nd coming of Christ and got out of my buddies truck got on my knees and started praying he thought I was nuts...It was a Fire Storm right in front of us we saw it jump the freeway. We rescued a friend from his apartment near Modoc and Los Positas I will never forget that day.

SHASTA GUY JUN 26, 2020 10:28 PM

Incredible story Roger. I slept at a friend's house downtown because I didn't feel it was safe to go back to my apartment.

CHICO BERKELEY JUN 26, 2020 01:20 PM

Wow- What a day that was.We were contractors on the (at the time) new Social Services building between Turnpike and El Sueno.Standing in the parking lot talking with R.P. Richards guys after doing calibration of the building Control system.I turned on my Digital Thermometer and was amazed that it was 106.7 degrees in the parking lot at 3:30,said something to the guys about a bad day for a fire(as a joke) and we went home.Messed around till 6PM and turned on the TV and there was KEYT 3 with cameras right where we had talked in the parking lot a couple hours earlier. I have never forgotten the day, or how it was started and that no one was really never prosecuted for starting it.

SOCALMOMMY JUN 26, 2020 01:15 PM

Heartbreaking photos. I remember this day like it just happened. I was in third grade. One of my best friends lost her home; they had seconds to flee and took nothing with them. My mom took me to the toy store and we picked out several toys to take to my friend, as she had lost everything but the clothes she was wearing. Our landlords' home was narrowly spared, and they had to turn their horses loose to run for their lives, as there was no time to trailer them. Ross still hangs around town, usually down on the beach in his very unusual van. You can't miss him. To think that someone could harbor such hatred, go to such lengths, just to spite another human is beyond comprehension.

A-1593266907 JUN 26, 2020 12:58 PM

I remember sitting at the corner of Modoc and Hollister, waiting to turn left onto Hollister, probably around 5pm that day. I will never forget the sight of the smoke coming down the mountain, so fast that it looked like water coming out of a fire hose. I was one of the last vehicles to go through that intersection before it was closed. My husband and I got married about 10 days later, and on our honeymoon in Canada, when we told people we were from Santa Barbara, they all wanted to talk about the fire.

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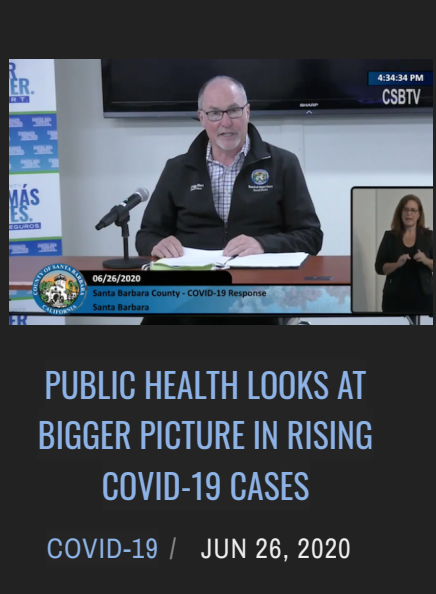

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